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FORTY YEARS AND ESCALATING: DRUGS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND
MEXICO

by

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14. ABSTRACT Mexico's drug war involving internal corruption, economic upheaval and violence is increasingly impacting the national security of the United States as the drug influence crosses the border. To win this drug war the United States and Mexico must become better neighbors and work towards common objectives that ultimately curb the demand.					
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The objective of Operation Intercept was to reduce the flow of drugs at the border between the United States and Mexico. The three minute vehicle inspections caused economic chaos for both sides of the border but had little impact on the drug flow.¹ This story could well fit into today's headlines, but it is from 1969. Forty years later the drug war is killing more Americans yearly than the combined yearly American casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. This war has Mexico battling corruption, economic upheaval and violence from drug cartels whereas the United States increasingly struggles with losses of national security, expanding drug influence and questionable policies. To win this drug war the United States and Mexico must become better neighbors and work towards common objectives that ultimately curb the demand.

It has taken several decades to develop, but the severity of the illicit drug problem is finally getting out and addressed more frequently at high levels. U.S. Congressional Representative Hal Rogers while speaking about the Mexican drug war pled that "we don't lose sight of the big picture and what's at stake, and that's no less than our National sovereignty."² His sentiments coincide with Michael Hayden, the former CIA director, as he spoke of violence in Mexico as the second greatest threat to U.S. national security, second only to al Qaeda.³ Furthermore, Director Hayden advocated that Mexico could become more problematic for the United States than Iraq.⁴

It is notable that each administration since the Johnson presidency touted concerns about drugs and their attendant problems, both domestically and internationally, yet the problem is now worse than when it became a national issue in the 1960s, and then Reagan's "war on drugs" in 1983. After four decades of battling drugs, estimates place the human toll around 20,000 drug induced deaths and a cost of \$280 billion of dollars a year.⁵ Yet many studies show the overall quantity of drugs reaching the U.S. consumer has not diminished, nor have the prices increased.

In fact, statistics reflect increased drug production, lower street prices and increased consumption of various drugs over the past twenty years.⁶ Tragically, this increased consumption also results in more drug induced deaths. The drug induced death rate in 1979 was 27.96 deaths per 100,000 whereas in 2000 it increased to 140.7 deaths per 100,000. Ultimately, the increased drug use means 19,698 people died in 2000 compared to 4,924 in 1979.⁷

The impact of expanding drug war is spreading throughout the United States. A Department of Justice report identifies that, “the 10 most dangerous American cities...[are] transit points for Mexican drug cartels.”⁸ Additionally, Phoenix is now the main hub for illegal drugs entering the United States. “Cartel chaos in Mexico is pushing bad elements north along with the dope...Phoenix... is now awash with kidnappings, 366 in 2008 alone, up from 96 a decade ago.”⁹ Reports show these are drug related kidnappings. Furthermore, a 2008 U.S. government report notes that there are now 230 cities throughout the United States that are drug distribution centers.¹⁰ Contrary to popular belief, many of the distribution centers are not in major cities, but are in smaller quiet communities.¹¹

This escalation in violence is not accidental. Cartels are more aggressive in getting drugs to the consumers. “In the summer of 2005, John Walters, then director of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, noted that, ‘the killing of rival traffickers is already spreading across the border.’”¹² Additionally, DEA officials reported that one cartel leader “told his associates to use deadly force to protect illegal shipments from seizures.”¹³ This edict reverses previously held cartel guidance to avoid the use of violence in the United States. Gun runners recently applied the decree and “opened fire on American anti-drug agents in Arizona from across the border in order to protect drug shipments from being seized.”¹⁴

The increased intensity closely relates to money. The U.S. government estimates that drug users spend \$60 billion dollars a year and that \$10-30 billion it makes its way south of the border. As a result of confronting the robust drug market in October 2009 the DEA announced the completion of a two day take down and the arrests of 303 individuals in an attempt to combat one of the drug cartels. These arrests combine with previous actions in “Project Coronado” for a total of 1,186 arrests, “seizure of approximately \$33 million in U.S. currency, 1,999 kilograms of cocaine, 2,730 pounds of methamphetamine, 29 pounds of heroin, 16,390 pounds of marijuana, 389 weapons, 269 vehicles and two clandestine drug labs.”¹⁵

Historically, U.S. policy for the war on drugs places greater emphasis on diminishing the availability of drugs by decreasing the production or interdicting drugs somewhere along the supply chain. This theory posits that if drug supplies are sufficiently diminished then the increased demand drive prices higher. Eventually the higher demand makes the drugs too expensive for the users to afford and thereby, in theory, decrease overall consumption. Nevertheless, “available evidence clearly indicates...that this supply-side policy has had no significant impact on the availability and price of illicit drugs in the United States. Since the 1980s, prices of illegal drugs have steadily declined and supply remains abundant.”¹⁶ This main focus on stopping the supply is part of reason for the U.S. drug problem today.

It takes multi-faceted approaches to combat the allure, power, and by-products related to illicit drugs. However, the ultimate key for the United States to win this battle relates to combating the individual desires to consume drugs. There is “a growing consensus that treatment and education are the most cost-effective ways to reduce drug consumption. A 1994 RAND study “found that \$34 million invested in treatment reduces cocaine use as much as \$366 million invested in interdiction or \$783 million in source-country programs...treatment is 7.3

times more cost-effective than domestic law enforcement in reducing cocaine consumption.”¹⁷

The prevention data still holds true as recently the Washington Office on Latin America suggested “cutting cartel revenues by reducing U.S. demand for illicit drugs through improved drug prevention education and increasing access to addiction treatment.”¹⁸

Yet, despite reports on the efficacy of treatment and education, the majority of the funds go to criminal justice and interdiction. Even with a 600 percent increase in the federal drug control budget from 1980-2000, the majority of the funds went to less effective program areas. Overall the budgets allotted 49 percent to criminal justice, 21 percent on interdiction, 16 percent to treatment and 15 percent to prevention.¹⁹ By 2007 the combined funding for treatment and prevention increased to 35 percent up 6 percent from 2000.²⁰ Some scholars relate these modest funding increases in prevention and treatment to the belief that crime prevention is less popular for politicians than programs that have the appearance of getting tough on crime.²¹

If more reasons to get tough on illicit drugs through prevention and education are necessary, than consideration of other drug related activities should further strengthen the argument. Coletta Youngers writes: “Drug trafficking breeds criminality, exacerbates criminal and political violence and fuels armed groups. It greatly increases problems of citizen security, public order, and ultimately law enforcement.”²² Areas such as gangs, murders, extortion, contraband, weapons trafficking, money laundering and human smuggling are only some of the more notable off-shoots related to drugs. In the long term, a key to impacting the supply chain and stemming the domestic effects of drugs is in the areas prevention and treatment.

Even though the United States needs to improve in the area of prevention, it also needs to better shoulder its responsibility in the international drug wars given that it is the number one consumer of illegal drugs in the world. As the primary consumer, and as a neighbor the United

States should not disregard Mexico's drug wars as it battles the trafficking of 90 percent of the cocaine, 80 percent of the marijuana, 80 percent of the methamphetamines and 20-30 percent of the heroin that comes into U.S. illicit drug market.²³ It is in the best interest of the United States to team with Mexico against drug trafficking because: 1) the problems eventually spill over the border, 2) the economies closely interlock, and 3) the widespread corruption takes outside support to overcome.

Corruption is the primary dilemma keeping Mexico from making significant headway in the drug war. There is corruption at all levels in the country including local, state and federal government officials as well as police and military forces. The corruption is systemic and not solely the practice of disparate individuals. In 1997, General Jesus Gutierrez-Rebollo, the head of Mexico's National Institute for the Combat of Drugs was arrested for collaborating with the Juarez Cartel. Additionally, Raul Salinas, the brother of President Salinas, was charged for depositing over \$100 million dollars of drug related money in a Swiss bank, whereas President Salinas' chief of staff was also involved in drug trafficking.²⁴ The corruption continues to be rampant as in May 2009 President Calderon's military officials arrested 10 mayors and 20 government officials in one state as part of the continued crackdown on drugs.²⁵

It is hard to know just how extensive the corruption truly is but the one thing is for sure, it is extensive in Mexico. "One knowledgeable Mexican source estimates that 20 percent of agents supposedly fighting the drug trade are actually on the payrolls of drug gangs...one former gang member puts the figure at 80 percent for state and federal officers."²⁶ The extensive corruption of the police prompted President Calderon in 2006 to deploy 45,000 members of the Mexican military to serve as an internal police force in an attempt to reorganize the corrupt police forces.²⁷ Moreover, the powerful "Las Zetas" cartel originated with military personnel

specialized in weaponry and special operations warfare. Such widespread corruption is as much a factor for the wealthy as it is for the poor.

Mexico's economic challenges lend itself to an impoverished populace amenable to doing most anything to provide for their basic needs. In 1994, drugs brought in somewhere between \$7-30 billion dollars into the Mexican economy – while Mexico's largest legal export commodity of oil only brought in \$7 billion dollars.²⁸ Moreover, in high drug trafficking states thousands of locals work in the production of marijuana and opium.²⁹ The citizens choose to raise drugs because it pays better than traditional crops and provides for some quality of life improvements. Cartels also employ those with specialized skills and even go so far as to advertise job openings on billboards and in the newspapers.³⁰

Consequently President Calderon's crackdown on drugs has some governors and leaders telling the President not to send more troops into their areas.³¹ The crackdown not only disrupts the leaderships corrupt lifestyles, but businesses dealing in honest establishments like car dealerships, restaurants, markets and other commercial entities suffer when the drug flow diminishes. It is significant to note that some estimates are that four percent of the Mexican economy comes from drug money. Experts warn that removal of drug funds could start a severe recession.³² Given the dynamics of corruption and economic impact some fear that the crackdown may end when President Calderon leaves office in 2012.

On the other hand the loss of the tainted money would diminish drug related violence. In the last two years drug trafficking violence spiked in Mexico with more than 5,600 people killed in 2008, an alarming increase of 110 percent over 2007.³³ The increases continued with at least 5,071 deaths by October 2009.³⁴ Some scholars fear the increase in violence and death may be a sign that the Mexican government is losing ground whereas others are hopeful that the cartels are

turning on each other as their movements become more restricted.³⁵ Regardless of which scholars offer the correct assessment, opinion polls show that “by a 2-to-1 margin, Mexicans believe that the powerful and well-armed cartels are outgunning the government even as the army takes a high-profile and unprecedented role.”³⁶ Some of the public skepticism for government success may relate to the alleged quantity of human rights abuses caused by the deployed military personnel.³⁷

The majority of the human rights abuses are not from the military, but by the cartels. They are infamous about carrying out threats against individuals, and their family members, that oppose them. The cartels are so bold and confident that signs advertise who they are targeting to kill.³⁸ This level of intimidation causes entire police forces to resign or die at the hands of the cartels. Part of the increased deaths is attributable to weapons purchased legally in the United States and taken illegally into Mexico.

According to Shannon O’Neil over “90 percent of the guns seized in Mexico and traced are found to have come from the United States...not just pistols but cartel favorites such as AR-15s and AK-47-style semiautomatic rifles.”³⁹ Mexican officials pled with U.S. officials to help with border gun control, especially after the U.S. ban on assault weapons expired in 2004. In response to the pleas in 2008 the United States and Mexico implemented the program “Armas Cruzadas” in attempt to slow the illegal weapons flow into Mexico.⁴⁰

Another step in the right direction is the implementation of the Merida Initiative allotting \$1.4 billion dollars spread out over several years to fight illicit drugs in Mexico and Central America. However, given the expansion of violence, corruption and distribution centers throughout Mexico and the United States, more monies should funnel into fighting drugs. This

is a relatively small contribution considering compared to the \$5 billion dollars allotted to Plan Colombia.

In both the United States and Mexico there are groups advocating legalization of drugs. They believe legalization would lower drug prices substantially, decrease the human rights abuses, end high cartel profits and provide another source for taxes. Currently there is not sufficient traction for legalization to become a reality in the United States and monies from the Merida Initiative would decrease for Mexico if they legalized drugs.

The United States and Mexico needs to create better lines of communication, interagency cooperation and bi-lateral agreements to turn the tide of the drug war. However, the United States should not solely rely on improved Mexican relations to stop the drug flow, because recent history has shown that as some avenues for trafficking shut down, others open up. Hence, even now as the Mexican cartels start to sense increased cooperation and pressure between the United States and Mexico, drug trafficking routes are starting to pick up in Canada.⁴¹

Ultimately after 40 years of interest and efforts the drug war is escalating. The best way to stop drug trafficking is to erode the demand. If the Americans curb their consumption then the cartels lose motivation to supply in the United States. If demand diminishes in the United States there should be less drug related criminal activities and most notably fewer drug related deaths. This long term prevention outlook would thus help both the United States and Mexico regain control and establish higher levels of security within each country and between the two nations.

End Notes

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- ⁴ Shannon O'Neil, "The Real War in Mexico." *Foreign Affairs*; Jul/Aug2009, Vol. 88 Issue 4, 15.
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